

# Perfection Perfected

## *The Stoic “Self-Eluding Sage” and Moral Progress in Hebrews*

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### Abstract

Hebrews evinces the linked exegetical aporiae of, on the one hand, tension between the asserted perfection of the believer and exhortations to further perfection and, on the other, a similar tension between Christ's exalted, preexistent nature and claims about his need for further perfection during his earthly life. The paper proposes the Stoic figure of the “self-eluding sage” as a helpful contextual analogue for explaining the indicative-imperative problem in Hebrews. Originally a product of early epistemological debates among Hellenistic philosophical schools, the “self-eluding sage” (διαλεληθῶς σοφός) was deployed by Philo and Plutarch in Roman-era debates on the nature of moral progress. Terminological and structural similarities between discussions of the Stoic figure and discussions of progress in Hebrews (especially 5:14-6:3) help contextualize the speech's concern for moral insight and improvement within a general Roman-era focus on moral progress toward filling communal roles.

### Keywords

Hebrews – Stoicism – moral progress – soteriology – Christology

While scholarship on the “indicative/imperative” tension in early Christian ethics has largely focused on the Pauline letters, the Epistle to the Hebrews offers similarly glaring paradoxes between descriptions of the believer's ethical attainment and exhortations to make further progress in virtue. Over the course of its exposition, Hebrews holds in tension statements concerning the “perfection” of the believer with parenesis toward ethical “maturity.” Moreover, parallel passages state that Christ, a preexistent being superior to the angels,

attained further “perfection” during his earthly life in order to qualify as high priest and forerunner of salvation. With the twin exegetical aporiae, scholars of Hebrews at least have the advantage of reading Christological and soteriological paradoxes in light of each other.

The present argument, in part, contributes to analysis of the indicative-imperative problem found in Hebrews by examining an ancient analogue that attracted similar attention for its paradoxical nature. In ridiculing such “contradictions” within Stoic thought, Plutarch wrote:

[T]heir most amazing opinion . . . is that, often, when virtue and happiness become present to a person, they believe he does not perceive (οὐδ’ αἰσθάνεσθαι) that he has attained it and that he is unaware (διαλεληθέναι) that, though just a bit before he was most wretched and foolish, he has now become wise and blessed. For not only is it ridiculous that the only thing someone having wisdom is not wise to is that he does not know that he is wise or that he has fled ignorance; but also, generally speaking, they make the good insignificant and obscure if it does not make itself sensible (αἴσθησιν) when it becomes present. (*Comm. not.* 1062B)

For Plutarch, one who is perfect surely must be able to “sense” that he has become so. Why would someone who has attained perfection lack one seemingly simple thing: the self-awareness that he has become perfect?

I propose that this Stoic idea, the διαλεληθὼς σοφός, the “self-eluding sage,” provides for scholars studying the indicative-imperative tension a helpful historical comparandum.<sup>1</sup> By no means do I suggest a direct borrowing of Stoic concepts. Nor do I think Hebrews communicates that believers are necessarily unaware of the ethical effects of receiving God’s spirit (that is, that they are particularly unwitting in the way Stoics thought a newly-minted sage might be); to be sure, Hebrews reflects repeated explication of believers’ new spiritual state through initial preaching, the ritual of baptism, and subsequent parenetic reminders.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I argue that the Stoic “self-eluding sage,” like the

1 For the translation “self-eluding sage,” see David Sedley, “Diodorus Cronus and Hellenistic Philosophy,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 23 (1977) 290 (the article is reprinted in *Classical Philosophy: Collected Papers*, Vol. 8: *Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Terence Irwin (New York: Garland, 1995) 74-120; I follow the original pagination).

2 It is even less likely that Hebrews would see Christ as being unaware of his own perfection at any point. As I discuss below, language of Christ being “perfected through suffering” can be helpfully explicated with comparison to Stoic ideas by showing how Christ’s eternal perfection was externally manifested through his life and sufferings, so that his virtuous faculty was

believer in Christ, has a “perfected” moral faculty yet must further “perfect” it in a habituated state of external practice. I also suggest this approach to Hebrews as a test-case for how first-century Christian texts can be understood within the context of a late-Hellenistic and early-Roman focus on virtue and progress, particularly among extra-mural appropriations of the Stoic language of moral progress that tied internal perfection to the inhabiting of communal roles. Much as Roman Stoics focused on virtue in connection to social vocations, Hebrews urges its audience toward the maturation of their purified virtuous faculties in emulation of Jesus’s priestly role, progressing toward the goal of an improved communal ethic. For Hebrews, “perfection” entails moral improvement understood as the overlap between existential and vocational realities.<sup>3</sup>

## 1 Levels of Perfection in Hebrews

Hebrews makes triumphant claims about the “perfection” brought about by Christ for believers. Near the end of the text’s main exposition (Jesus’s death as priestly sacrifice), the text explains the sacrifice’s effects on the believer: “He abolishes the first [the “sacrifices” of LXX Ps 39 mentioned just before] so that

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existentially expressed in the vocation of high priest and bringing vicarious perfection to future believers.

- 3 In examining levels of perfection in first-century Christian texts, my thesis mirrors the work of Troels Engberg-Pedersen, who posits such a schema not only within Stoic philosophy but also in Paul’s ethical system. In *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 71–72, he suggests that Stoics understood a second phase of progress to follow upon initial perfection, providing an analogy to the indicative-imperative scheme in Paul. In support, Engberg-Pedersen cites (but does not discuss) relevant Stoic fragments (*SVF* 3,500–18 on 311n.18; many of these are discussed below) and his earlier work on Stoic ethics, *The Stoic Theory of Oikeiosis: Moral Development and Social Interaction in Early Stoic Philosophy* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1990) 139–140. In proposing two levels of Stoic perfection, he does not mention or seem to infer the “self-eluding sage” in either book, though, in his understanding, the second stage of moral progress is one in which a fundamental insight is habitually acted out, an observation resembling my reading of the διαλεληθώς σοφός, which may have been just one way Stoics spoke of the solidification of the sage’s virtue.

On Stoic terminology for progress in Hebrews, see H.P. Owen, “The ‘Stages of Ascent’ in Hebrews, V. 11–VI. 3,” *NTS* 3 (1956/57) 243–253, in which the author posits Stoic stages of progress as a background for understanding Hebrews’ scheme of perfection. I disagree with Owen’s reconstruction of the two stages of perfection in Philo (and, thus, Heb 5:11–6:3) as, first, practical-ethical and, second, (platonically) theoretical. Rather, I reverse his ordering based on my reading of classic sources on the “unwitting sage.” See also James Moffatt, *Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1948) 67 and 69.

the second might stand, by whose will we have been sanctified (ἡγιασμένοι ἐσμέν) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once and for all . . . For through a single offering he has perfected those who are being sanctified (τετελείωκεν . . . τοὺς ἡγιαζομένους) forever” (Heb 10:9b-10, 14). Verse 10 indicates that the audience has been “sanctified,” while v. 14 points to their “perfection,” though the present tense of the participle in v. 14 (“those who are being sanctified [ἡγιαζομένους]) opens in short space an aporia between present attainment and future goal with regard to the believer’s sanctification.<sup>4</sup> One might ascribe the past-tense, realized pole of the tension to pedagogical rhetoric, a sort of exaggeration spurring the reader by ascribing to him the ethical state the teacher wants him to achieve. Still, the proximity of the contrast between past and present “sanctification” raises, among other issues, the question of the relationship between language of sanctification and that of perfection.

The tension is compounded when one considers passages in which Hebrews directly addresses its readership, especially the extended parenetic sections 5:11-6:20 and 10:19-39, framing the exposition of Jesus as high priest in 7:1-10:18. The most important passage for our purposes is the first of these, particularly its outset:

About this [the idea of Jesus as high priest] we have an account that is long and difficult, since you have become sluggish in your hearing. For though you ought to be teachers by now, you again need someone to teach you the basic elements of the beginning of the oracles of God; and you have become people who need milk, not solid food. For anyone who partakes of milk is unacquainted with the message of righteousness, for he is an infant; solid food is for the mature (τελείων), those who, because of a habituated state (ἔξιν), have faculties of perception that have been trained (τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα) to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving behind the initial message about Christ, let us carry on toward perfection (τελειότητα), not laying once again a foundation of repentance from dead works and faith in God, teaching about baptisms

4 On the continuous present of τοὺς ἡγιαζομένους in 10:14 and its potential contrast with the perfect participle of 10:10, see Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 281: “The creative tension between what Christ is understood to have done and what remains for his followers to do begins to emerge with particular clarity.” Other passages seem to imply the perfection of believers, though they may imply a proleptic sense of perfection. On Heb 2:10-11, see below. Similarly, critiques of the Law and Old Covenant in 7:18-19 and 9:9 and their inability to bring perfection suggest the perfecting power of Christ’s action as an attained reality. See also 11:39-40 and 12:22-24.

and laying-on of hands, resurrection from the dead and eternal judgment. And this we will do, if God permits. (Heb 5:11-6:3)

The author deploys a metaphor common to moral pedagogy, one that draws upon human developmental stages, to urge his audience to ethical and intellectual progress.<sup>5</sup> The readers are “infants,” stuck at the “beginning,” with “perception” lacking “training” through “practice” (or “habituation”) for moral discernment. Further, the author asserts that his audience has not yet achieved “maturity” (to keep with the developmental imagery) or “perfection”—and that the remainder of the letter will constitute an attempt to progress them toward that goal. Thus, the letter asserts both that the readers have been perfected *and* that perfection is an end toward which they are to advance.

A similar disjunction emerges when we analyze language of *Christ's* perfection (an issue more commonly treated in scholarship on the text). Hebrews clearly sees Christ as blameless, pure, and perfect. But such an understanding is problematized throughout Hebrews—most tellingly for our purposes, just before the parenetic passage of 5:11-6:3, considered above.

[H]e, who, in the days when he was in the flesh, offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who could save him from death, and was heard because of his piety—though he was a son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered, and, having been perfected (τελειωθείς), became a cause of eternal salvation for all who are obedient, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. (5:7-10)

A similar sentiment had already been expressed in 2:10: “For it was fitting for him [God], because of whom are all things and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect (τελειώσαι) through sufferings the forerunner of their salvation.” The statements in 2:10 and 5:8-9 that Jesus was “perfected” due to his suffering and “learning obedience” need not necessarily call into question Hebrews’s view of Christ’s perfection or moral blamelessness. Rather, it may require a consideration of what modalities (for example, moral, vocational, existential) perfection might take within the text as a whole,

5 See Philo, *Agr.* 9; *Congr.* 19; *Migr. Abr.* 29; *Som.* 2.9; *Omn. prob. lib.* 160; and Epictetus, *Disc.* 2.15.39 (listed in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 159 n. 59, and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews* [NTL; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006] 156).

particularly in light of the problem of the relationship between soteriology and Christology in Hebrews.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The Stoic Unwitting Sage

A similar paradox between attained and future perfection emerged in Stoic philosophy. We can find an early treatment of the nature of the διαλεληθώς σοφός or “self-eluding sage” in a fragment preserved by Stobaeus and attributed to the third-century B.C.E. head of the school, Chrysippus:

The one, he says, progressing to the peak (ἄκρον) produces completely all moral duties (καθήκοντα) and neglects none of them. He says the life of this one is not yet happy, but happiness only comes to him once actions (πράξεις) themselves take on solidity (βέβαιον) and a habituated character (ἐκτικόν) and attain a fixity (πῆξιν) of its own. (Stobaeus, *Flor.* 103.22 = *SVF* 3.510)

One who has reached the “peak” (ἄκρον) must confirm his perfection (or “happiness”) through acquiring a “habituated character” (ἐκτικόν) and “fixity” (πῆξιν). Such confirmation occurs through “actions” (πράξεις) that are habituated in a way that omits no “moral duties” or καθήκοντα.

Elsewhere, Arius Didymus, according to the *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, more explicitly discusses the concept:

They think that a man becomes a sage unwittingly (διαλεληθότα τινὰ σοφόν) at first, neither desiring it nor being fully engaged in any of the specific things attained by wishing for them, because the fact that what is necessary to him is present is not something he can judge. Such comprehensions (διαλήψεις) will occur not only with regard to wisdom (ἐπὶ τῆς

6 See the discussion in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 86-87 and 153; many, such as Attridge, interpret Jesus's perfecting as a process of making him “existentially” prepared for his vocation as high priest (the position is now generally associated with the work of David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987] 96-103); see Craig Koester, *Hebrews* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 123-124, who dispenses with any moral implications of the terminology by rendering it as expressing “completion”; and Johnson, *Hebrews*, 96. Hebrews's language of perfection clearly, as the above commentators note, reflects cultic language of fittingness for priesthood found in the LXX as well as a host of ritual contexts in the ancient world. But such language should also be seen as pointing analogically to ideas of ethical transformation as a result of vicarious participation in the effects of Jesus's activity construed as cultic.

φρονήσεως) but also with regard to other pursuits (ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν). (Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 111)<sup>7</sup>

In this explanation, the “comprehension” (διαλήψις, close to the Stoic notion of cognition or κατάληψις, discussed below) of perfection occurs in the same way it might with regard to other “pursuits” or “skills” (τεχνῶν) at which a person might seek mastery. One might ask why the sage cannot “judge” his moral state but must come to comprehend it in the same way one gains self-awareness of a superior level of skill in, say, oratory or painting. What made the Stoics posit an intermediate stage of ignorance at the summit of perfection?

Modern scholarship has suggested the “self-eluding sage” as a product of inter-scholastic debates at the dawn of the Hellenistic philosophical movements.<sup>8</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, Chrysippus wrote a treatise entitled Περὶ τοῦ διαλεληθότος (7.198), classified by Laertius under the seventh series of the scholar’s works on “Logic as concerned with syllogisms and moods” (Λογικοῦ τόπου πρὸς τοὺς λόγους καὶ τοὺς τρόπους). One might expect the idea to be treated in works of ethics. But, sure enough, earlier in Laertius’s treatment of the Stoics, among the list of syllogisms (here called ἄποροι λόγοι) especially considered by Zeno we find “the Veiled Ones, the Elusive Ones (διαλεληθότες), the Heaps [or *Sorites*; σωρίται], the Horns, and the Nobodies” (7.82).

Syllogisms were a popular method of reasoning and debate in the competitive atmosphere of late-fourth- and early-third-century Athenian philosophy. Many of the syllogisms Laertius lists along with the διαλεληθὼς entail the idea of gradual change and how people comprehend and describe it. In the history of philosophy, the *Sorites* (“Heaps” argument), in its various forms, has become the preeminent example of these related puzzles: imagine a “heap” of sand. If you subtract a single grain, you are still left with a heap. Subtract another, and it is still a heap. At what point, then, does the collection of sand grains cease to qualify as a heap? One soon realizes that a similar argument can be made with respect to a host of concepts and qualifiers.

7 For this passage (= *SVF* 3.540), which is a bit of a mess textually, I follow Arthur J. Pomeroy, ed., *Arius Didymus: Epitome of Stoic Ethics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999) 96, but have altered his translation, in part to match the translation of key terms elsewhere in the paper. Arius’s epitome is preserved in the *Eclogue* of Stobaeus.

8 For the following reconstruction, I rely on Sedley, “Diodorus Cronus,” 94–96, and Francesca Alesse, “Il tema stoico del ΔΙΑΛΕΛΗΘΩΣ ΣΟΦΟΣ e il ΔΙΑΛΑΝΘΑΝΩΝ ΛΟΓΟΣ dell’eristica megarica,” *Elenchos* 18 (1997) 57–75. To be specific, the “elusive” syllogism discussed below was probably developed by Eubulides of Megara and used prominently by Diodorus Cronus of the Dialectical school. According to Sedley, the Academic Arcesilaus would have adopted the syllogisms from Diodorus.



So with moral progress: for the Stoic founder, Zeno, virtue was a state that could only be attributed to the sage. All other actions, states, or individuals were evil, no matter how much relatively better one might be than another. A paraphrase of Plutarch's later formulation summarizes the notion: whether one is drowning in water a mile deep or ten feet deep, one is still drowning.<sup>9</sup> But at what point can one making moral progress be said to be truly wise? At what precise point does an individual cease being underwater and begin to breath the fresh air of virtue? Or: can a sage, upon becoming perfectly wise, simultaneously know that he is perfectly wise? (This may be an adequate description of the "Elusive" problem.)<sup>10</sup>

While the "Elusive" syllogism originated in early debates over logic and epistemology, Stoics seem subsequently to have incorporated the notion of the "self-eluding sage" more practically into their ideas about ethical progress. We may see indications of how in the fragments from Chrysippus and Arius quoted above: a sage will know he is a sage when he consistently performs moral duties or shows evidence of mastery. In each case, the evidence is external—that is, the deeds resulting from a perfected moral faculty. Another indication of how they might have explained the concept points to their materialistic psychology and the concept of *ἐξίς* as mentioned above (*SVF* 3.510). For the Stoics, *ἐξίς* or "tenor" meant a number of different though interrelated things. It could refer to the way in which cosmic *pneuma* held together discrete, inanimate objects.<sup>11</sup> But it also referred to the relatively tensive aspect of the soul, resulting in various moral or pneumatic abilities. A wise man is said to be virtuous insofar as his virtue has acquired "tenor," making virtue a characteristic quality, analogous to "the hardness of iron or the whiteness of silver."<sup>12</sup> Thus, insofar as the sage is different in kind, not degree, from all others with regard to virtue, his virtuous faculty has achieved a special sort of *ἐξίς* but may still admit a greater

9 Plutarch, *Comm. not.* 1063A.

10 Sedley, "Diodorus Cronus," 95-96.

11 See Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1.313, citing Origen, *Princ.* 3.1.2-3 (= *SVF* 2.988). "Εξίς was also a concept among Platonists and Peripatetics; see Richard A. Wright, "Plutarch on Moral Progress," in *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (New York: Routledge, 2008) 140.

12 Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1.289; see also 1.285-86 and 372, citing Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories*, 237.25-238.20 (= *SVF* 2.393) and Stobaeus, 2.73.1-13 (= *SVF* 3.111) and their discussions on 1.289 and 376. According to Stobaeus, the tenor of Stoic virtue makes all the sage's other interests and abilities (or "pursuits," such as love of music, etc.) stable with regard to tenor, as well. This may be the reason that Arius Didymus claims that solidity with regard to moral perfection also occurs with regard to other τέχναι (see *Epitome of Stoic Ethics* 11n, cited above).



degree of solidity, one which might be gained by his observing the consistency of his ethical performance.

A further and more extensive appropriation of the self-eluding sage within a discussion of ethics can help us see more clearly its contours and possible implications. Philo of Alexandria mentions the topic in his *On Husbandry* (*De agricultura*), where he reads Noah's vocation as a way of discussing ethical cultivation. The general idea of husbandry and household management raised by the story of Noah, however, leads Philo to consider an intertext<sup>13</sup> later in the Torah: Moses's advice to the Israelites before going into battle, found in Deut 20:5-7, within an extended discussion of the Exodus generation's armed encounters in the wilderness, interpreted as allegories for those engaged in ethical discernment doing rhetorical "battle" with sophists.

The command is issued through the army's scribes when the battle is close by and at the gates of those it is about to encounter. They say these things: "What man, having built a new house has not yet dedicated it? Let him go back and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicates it. And has someone planted a vineyard and not enjoyed its fruits? Let him go back and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy from it. And has someone become engaged to a woman and not taken her in? Let him go back and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her in." (*Agr.* 148, citing Deut 20:5-7)

Philo first considers the impracticality of Moses's advice if taken as literal, military strategy (*Agr.* 149-156). Would not those with something to lose to the enemy—houses, vineyards, and wives—be most eager to defend them? Since the literal meaning makes no practical sense, Philo is driven to search for its ethical import. "It is not about a house or a vineyard or a woman betrothed and acknowledged . . . but about the faculties of the soul (περὶ τῶν κατὰ ψυχὴν δυνάμεων), through which arise the reception of beginnings (ἀρχάς) and progressings (προκοπάς) and perfections (τελειότητας) in praiseworthy deeds" (*Agr.* 157). For Philo, the passage from Deuteronomy deals with each of these stages of moral progress in reverse order: the suitor is the initiate to virtue, the one making progress cultivates his vineyard, and the one who has attained perfection has completed a house that "has not yet become firmly established"

13 The intertext suggests itself due to the linkage between the phrase ἐφύτευσεν ἀμπελῶνα in the story of Noah (specifically, Gen 9:20) and Deut 20:6; see David T. Runia, "The Structure of Philo's Allegorical Treatise *De Agricultura*," *SPhilo* 22 (2010) 103.

(πῆξιν λαβούσης; lit. “taken on fixity”; 158). All three types of men must turn away from wars with sophists.<sup>14</sup>

Philo realizes that, while the inexperience of the beginner and progressor might self-evidently disqualify them from struggle with sophists, it is less clear why one who has attained perfection would not be up to the fight. So he explains that, in interpreting the figure of the man who has built a house but not dedicated it, he draws upon a specific concept of “the philosophers.” Such a man

is still unpracticed in virtue. It is necessary that the plaster be established more firmly (βεβαίως) and receive fixity (πῆξιν) so that the souls of those who have been perfected (τῶν τελειωθέντων), having been strengthened, might be fixed more solidly through continuous care and repeated exercises (γυμνάσμασιν). Those who have not attained these conditions are said by the philosophers to be unwitting sages (διαλεληθότες . . . σοφοί); for they say that those who have driven just to the peak of wisdom and have just now, for the first time, touched its borders, are unable to know their own perfection (ἀμήχανον εἰδέναι . . . τὴν ἑαυτῶν τελείωσιν). For the following two things cannot exist at the same time: the arrival at the boundary and the conception (κατάληψιν) of the arrival. But at the border there is an ignorance that is not far removed from knowledge (ἐπιστήμης) but rather is nearby and next door to it. (*Agr.* 160-61)<sup>15</sup>

What, then, are the final but crucial steps by which the διαλεληθὼς σοφός might perfect his perfection, as it were, by becoming aware of it? For Philo, the sage is completely perfected “when he fully conceives and understands and knows his own faculties” (τοῦ . . . καταλαμβάνοντος καὶ συνιέντος καὶ τὰς ἑαυτοῦ δυνάμεις ἐπισταμένου ἄκρως; 162). Philo, however, does not explain explicitly but goes on to describe the three types—beginner, progressor, and unwittingly perfect—as three eternal “faculties” (δυνάμεις) that are akin to “stamps” (σφραγίδες) imprinting themselves on the souls of men (166-168). These three faculties are

14 On the identity of Philo's sophists, see Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997; 2002) 59-79. In the passage under consideration, Winter sees the sophists as teachers of rhetoric distinct from other teachers, such as grammarians, or those who fill other social roles. On Hellenistic and Roman focus on the ethics of fitting social roles, see below.

15 On this passage in relation to Heb 5:11-6:3 (but with no discussion of the unwitting sage), see C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Gabalda, 1952) 1.55, and, *contra* Spicq, Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 292-297.

not only internal but also gifted by God; indeed, some may seem perfect, but if their progress was attained by their own merits and not through God's grace (τὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ δοθείσας . . . χάριτας; 168) or will (ἐπιφροσύνην θεοῦ; 169), they are destined to fall away from what progress they have made.<sup>16</sup>

If the notion of the unwitting sage seems paradoxical to modern readers, they are in good ancient company, as we saw at the outset of this essay with regard to Plutarch's anti-Stoic tracts, in which he targets the διαλεληθὼς σοφός as a particularly egregious example of contradictory elements in the Stoic system. In the passage quoted above, Plutarch claims that the idea goes not only against common, understandable assumptions about virtue and the nature of the good, but also against the Stoics' other teachings. Though they profess that virtue and vice can be “perceived” (see also *Stoic. rep.* 1042E-F), they also claim that the sage “does not perceive (οὐδ' αἰσθάνεσθαι) that he has attained it [virtue] and that he is unaware (διαλεληθέναι) that, though just a bit before he was most wretched and foolish, he has now become wise and blessed.” Such wisdom, for Plutarch, is rendered “insignificant and obscure if it does not make itself sensible (αἰσθησιν) when it becomes present” (*Comm. not.* 1062B). At stake are the perceptibility and, thus, the discernment of the good itself. Plutarch reduces this to sensory imagery; if sight detects even slight distinctions in appearance (and not merely the vast difference between, say, white and black), how then could the sage discern precise shades of good and evil but not perceive his own perfection, as it is as starkly different from his prior state of vice as light from dark? Even with regard to phenomena internal to the individual, a man (and certainly a sage) can make distinctions—for example, between health and wellness (1062C-D). “Since they [those who progress to becoming sages] change at the peak of progress (ἐκ τῆς ἄκρας προκοπῆς) to happiness and virtue, this necessitates one of two choices: either that progress is neither a state of evil nor unhappiness, or that virtue does not differ much from evil, nor happiness from unhappiness, but that the distinction between evil things and good things is small and imperceptible (ἀνεπαίσθητον); for then men having the good instead of the evil would not be unaware (διελάνθανον)” (1062D-E).

To my knowledge, we have no Stoic answer to Plutarch's interrogations. Using the language of the sage's self-knowledge found in the Stoic fragments and Philo, however, we might hazard a guess. While the individual virtues—or, at least, the actions that count as external evidence for their presence—might

16 Some ancient descriptions of Stoic theories of the nature and attainment of virtue claim that virtue can attain ἔξις but might fall away if it does not further attain “character” or διέθεσις. See Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1.376.

be perceptible, recognition of virtue as a faculty was a matter of more secure knowledge gained over time. In the passages cited above, Philo consistently refers to the sage's knowledge of his own perfection as *κατάληψις* ("cognition") or *ἐπιστήμη* ("knowledge"), far more secure forms of knowledge gained as a result of especially clear perceptions or a pattern of perceptions. Thus, the change from evil to good in the sage is not instantaneously grasped; rather, the sage gradually observes that he is consistently fulfilling all moral duties with an ease and security not experienced before, and this pattern results in unshakable cognition or knowledge of his own perfection.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, one can understand why Plutarch might chafe at the notion of an unwitting sage. As Richard A. Wright has argued in a recent essay, Plutarch's main concern was how to outline a pedagogical scheme characterized by clear signs of progress.<sup>18</sup> The project seems tied into a more general focus among moralists on discrete virtues and how to cultivate them in the average, upper-class male. During the late Republic and early Empire, even some Stoics seem to have modified the strict, classical focus on virtue as unitary (referring to a perfected cognitive faculty), shifting attention toward the various goods in society and among different types of individuals and social roles.<sup>19</sup> Writers sought more and more to apply the Stoic emphasis on ethics to those who fell short of the theoretical category of "sage," perhaps as a way of harnessing the power of the Stoic insistence on the internal mechanics of virtue but in a way that dwelled more on the practical ethics of everyday living.<sup>20</sup>

17 With regard to Stoic "cognition" and "knowledge" in relation to the unwitting sage's further progress, note that both categories imply for the Stoics a secure (*ἀσφαλῆ*) mental apprehension: see Stobaeus 2.73.16-74.3 (= *SVF* 3.112), cited in Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1.256.

18 Wright, "Plutarch on Moral Progress," 136-149.

19 See the well-known passage in Cicero, *Off.* 2.35, in which Cicero attributes to Panaetius the practice of speaking *ad opinionem communem, ut vulgis*, and *de opinione populari* when separating the virtues. In general, Panaetius (and, following him, Cicero) focused on the social roles suited to a person's "natural" character (*πρόσωπον* or *persona*); see Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1.368, and Timothy Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 67-71.

20 The phenomenon of "Roman Stoicism" has long been a topic of debate. For our purposes, see Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), on Roman Stoicism proffering a self partially defined by its social responsibility, unified by both "ontological" and "social aspects" (for these terms, see 17), as well as Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 157-171.

It is perhaps as a part of this general trajectory that we can better understand early Jesus-movement use of ideas similar to that of the Stoic self-eluding sage.

### 3 A Body Perfected: The Externality of Perfection in Christ and Believer

Terminology surrounding the Stoic unwitting sage finds numerous parallels within the main parenetic passage in question, Heb 5:11-6:3. As mentioned above, the “milk-solid food” metaphor indicates language of moral progress as used in a wide range of ancient writers. Its use in the midst of a text imputing at least partial present perfection to its audience leaves a tension to be explored. Particularly important for interpreting the passage is how it explains the concept of “perfection” or “maturity” (τελείων; 5:14). First, the passage claims mature or perfect believers have attained that state διὰ ἔξιν. Translation and interpretation of the phrase has been controversial, with standard notions of “practice” sometimes being critiqued for not incorporating the notion of a more diffuse “character” or “way of life.”<sup>21</sup> The Stoic notion of how a sage attains a “tenor” or “habituated character” for his perfected virtuous faculty, however, seems to incorporate both senses, as is evident from the term’s usage (and its synonyms) found in the Chrysippean fragment in Stobaeus (*SVF* 3.510), in which the sage only becomes aware of his perfection when his “actions (πράξεις) themselves take on solidity (βέβαιον) and habituated character (ἐκτικόν) and attain a fixity (πῆξιν) of its own.” We will pursue these synonyms for “habituation” in a moment. For now, notice that how it is external “actions” (πράξεις) that are brought into a state of security, reflecting something about the sage’s virtue as internal ἔξις.

Heb 5:14 has its own terminology spelling out the nature of ἔξις as perfection. It consists of “trained faculties of perception” (τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα) that are thus able to “discern good and evil.” The ability to perceive what is good in order to do it is what pertains to perfection. Note again that in *SVF* 3.510, a sage become perfect when he “produces completely all moral duties (καθήκοντα) and neglects none of them.” Moreover, recall my discussion of the role of αἰσθήσις in debates over the Stoic unwitting sage; Plutarch wondered how a sage could not “perceive” (αἰσθάνεσθαι) his perfection. I argued that, in light of the Stoic fragments, as well as Philo’s deployment of the self-eluding sage, it seemed that “cognition” (κατάληψις) or “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη) of a

21 On the problems of translating ἔξις (with a focus on Heb 5:14), see John A.L. White, “Hebrews 5:14 and “Ἐξις: A History of Misunderstanding,” *NovT* 34.2 (1997) 151-176.

perfected moral faculty would, in part, be achieved through a new sage's gradual self-“perception” of his own, successful moral actions. For Hebrews, fully perfected virtue is a matter of the way in which αἰσθητήρια discern good and evil deeds. For both the Stoics and the author of Hebrews, final perfection is achieved when one's ability to perceive moral duties—the difference between good and evil—becomes habituated and, thus, clearly present. Finally, for Hebrews, maturity is a matter of training (γεγυμνασμένα), precisely as it was for Philo in his initial description of the unwitting sage as needing solidity gained by “repeated exercise” (γυμνάσασιν).<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the confines of 5:11-6:3, Hebrews bears other conceptual links to the self-eluding sage. The letter deploys another term used by Chrysippus to express solidified perfection. Forms related to the word βέβαιος occur in Hebrews seven times, more frequently than in any other work of the NT or LXX—though in three cases they refer to the “confirmation” of a statement or agreement. Four occurrences, however, echo the notion of solidified perfection found in 5:11-6:3 and in texts explaining the Stoic unwitting sage. Heb 3:14 lies in another of the letter's parenetic passages (3:12-19) concluding the chapter's midrash urging believers to avoid the sins of the Exodus generation. “For we have become sharers with Christ, if indeed we hold fast the beginning (τὴν ἀρχήν) of our assurance firm until the end (μέχρι τέλους βεβαίαν)—as it is said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’ [Ps 95:7-8]” (Heb 3:14-15). Here, progress is something that must carry on from a “beginning” (ἀρχήν) until an “end” (τέλους, evoking “perfection”) by holding the beginning firm (βεβαίαν). Thus, the moral and eschatological process outlined in Hebrews is understood as a firming, a confirmation.

Attention to terminological affinities with Stoic pedagogy here simultaneously brings to the fore one of the major differences between Stoic perfection and perfection in Hebrews: whereas “beginning” for Stoics (again, see Philo) is a state of initial progress leading only theoretically to a final insight constituting perfection, for Hebrews initial perfection coincides with the reception of the spirit at the “beginning,” that is, concurrent with initiation into the community. Subsequently, the process following God's imputing of perfection in the believer is a “firming” or “confirmation” of that “assurance,” that initial “perfection.”

22 We might also note the imagery in Heb 6:1 of leaving behind beginning instruction, a process portrayed as “not again laying a foundation” (μὴ πάλιν θεμέλιον καταβαλλόμενοι). As seen above, Philo latches onto similar imagery in Deut 20:5 in which solidifying perfection consists in “dedicating” (ἐνεκαίνισεν)—putting on final touches, so to speak—one's house.



The concept of “confirmation” recurs at the end of the longer parenthetic section found in 5:14-6:20: “This we have as a secure (ἀσφαλῆ) and firm (βεβαίαν) anchor of the soul, that has entered the inner places behind the curtain, where a forerunner has entered on our behalf—Jesus, who according to the order of Melchizedek has become a high priest forever” (6:19-20). (This last mention of Jesus as high priest leads into the Melchizedek argument proper in chapters 7-10.) Here, Jesus as “forerunner” provides a number of benefits to be later conferred on the believer: entrance into the “inner places” characterized as being “secure and firm.” Just as Jesus “secured” his position as perfect son and high priest, so must the believer “secure” his moral “perfection.”

Such a comparison between Jesus and the believer recalls our earlier attention to the notion in Hebrews that Jesus, much like the believer, still required a further type of perfection. The link between perfection in Jesus and believers relies, as does so much in Hebrews, on the central cultic imagery for what Jesus performed and attained. As read in 5:7-9, Jesus, during his human life, “learned obedience” and was “perfected” through his sufferings (see also 2:10). As discussed above, scholarly debate over Jesus’s process of perfection in Hebrews divides itself over whether such perfection is internal and moral or “vocational” and functional (that is, pertaining to his role as high priest). The external aspects of his perfection are exegetically obvious, as David Peterson, among others, has shown: Christ’s time on earth is devoted to filling certain roles, including new high priest. Similarly, the believer’s perfection affords him an access to the heavenly places, access cast in covenantal and cultic terms,<sup>23</sup> a process of “sanctification” beginning at communal initiation and progressing in a forward “approach” to which the author exhorts his readers (see especially 10:22).

A clear example of such a joining of ethical/existential and external/vocational qualities in Jesus can be found in a climactic passage (already considered above), near the end of Hebrews’s exposition of Jesus as high priest. Indeed, immediately following this passage comes a parenthetic section that bookends the passage with which we began our investigation (5:14-6:20). Here, the author has Jesus speak a passage from LXX Ps 39 as an expression of his entering and action in the world.

23 Space does not permit entrance into the debate over what cultic roles readers of Hebrews are envisioned as filling. Are they imagined as priests entering the heavenly temple, serving under Christ? Or are they a new (lay) Israel, approaching in worship? See the discussion in John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (JSOTSup; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991). In either case, Hebrews attempts better to integrate believers into a communal context.



Therefore, when [Jesus] came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice or offering you have not wanted, but a body (σῶμα) you have prepared for me. In whole offerings and offerings for sin you are not pleased. Then he said: ‘Look, I have come (in the scroll of the book it has been written about me) to do your will, God’” [LXX Ps 39:7-9]. Just above, when he says, “Sacrifices and offerings and whole offerings and offerings for sin you have not wanted nor are you pleased in them”—such things are offered according to the Law. Then he has said: “Look, I have come to do your will.” He removes the first so that the second might stand. By this will we have been sanctified (ἡγιασμένοι ἐσμέν) through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all. (Heb 10:5-10)

Initially, the author is most interested in providing Jesus with a “body” to sacrifice in replacement for the many offerings prescribed by the Law. The specific psalmic passage, however, also allows Hebrews to focus on Jesus’s inhabiting of a “body” in order to “do God’s will.” Jesus’s entrance into the world allows him to act out his perfection, to “do God’s will” externally, in a “body.” The idea of external actions as a result of internal purification will become more important as the passage progresses. For the effects of Christ “doing God’s will” end up impacting many bodies, a new community of believers. Though the perfection of this community is the main focus of Hebrews, the same moral and psychological logics are at least partly at play in both Christ’s actions and the believers’ vicarious participation.

As read earlier in the letter (2:10-11), by Jesus’s “single offering, he has perfected (τετελειώκεν) for all time those who are being sanctified (τοὺς ἁγιαζομένους; 10:14).” Here, the process of perfection is in some sense partly concurrent with that of sanctification. As many have shown, τελειοῦν in the LXX could function as a technical term for priestly consecration. In turn, ἁγιάζειν in Hebrews affects the believer’s conscience, an internal transformation enabling ethical behavior (much in the same way that a perfected virtuous faculty produces the perfected sage in Stoic thought). The usage and contexts of each term, however, tend to indicate separate emphases. For example, note that, in Hebrews, Jesus himself is never the grammatical object of ἁγιάζειν, as he is of τελειοῦν. “Sanctification” activates an internal change in the believer—a state that always characterized Jesus—also described in Hebrews as a new covenant relationship with God, while “perfection” involves the approach to God, following in the footsteps of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

24 On “sanctification” as a covenantal concept in Hebrews, see Peterson, *Perfection*, 72 and 151-152.

So then, the climactic paranesis to "approach" (10:19-39, which in many ways recalls the earlier exhortation, 5:11-6:20, at the beginning of the "High Priest" section) further helps describe the present state and future goals of the audience:

So, brothers, having by the blood of Jesus the boldness required for entrance into the holy places, an entrance he opened for us as a new a living path through the veil (that is, his flesh), and also having a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with true hearts and the full conviction of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our body washed with pure water. (10:19-22)

The pure heart and conscience of the believer should result in a worshipful approach to the holy places matching Jesus's ascent to the office of high priest. The procession, couched in moral terms, however, takes the form of external actions, "good works" such as meeting together and mutual parenesis (10:24-25). The process of final perfection is figured as a cultic act but described in terms of communal ethics.

The exhortation concludes in the same way: believers must now enact their perfection through actions, particularly through endurance of individual and communal suffering.

Recall the former days, when, having been enlightened (φωτισθέντες), you endured a great contest of sufferings (παθημάτων), sometimes being exposed to public shame through reproaches and afflictions, sometimes coming to share with those who were treated in the same way. For you sympathized even with their chains and accepted with joy plunder of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves have a better and more abiding possession. So do not throw away your boldness, which has a great reward. For you need endurance so that, by doing the will of God, you might receive the promise. For "yet a little while longer, the one coming will arrive and will not delay. My righteous one will live by faith, and if he should draw back, my soul will not be pleased with him" [Hab 2:3-4]. But we are not characterized by shrinking away toward destruction but by faith for the preserving of our soul. (10:32-39)

Even more clearly, "enlightenment" is followed by external suffering or comfort for others who suffer. The schema presented here continues to play with cultic language of "approaching" and not "shrinking back," but it becomes even more evident that the cultic, vocational language itself is used to exploit overlaps

with language of moral progress. The inner recesses, the moral faculties, of the believer have been perfected and only need practiced and consistent external expression to complete the progression toward full perfection, a state of ethical attainment figured as open access and worship, and consisting of behavior that builds up the fledgling community.

In both cases, that of the believer's post-perfection progress and Christ's perfection through incarnation, an externalization of perfection, the putting to practice of a virtuous faculty, characterizes an ethical paradigm for pedagogy, as it did for the Stoics and their attempts to explain the concept of the self-eluding sage. Perfect virtue cannot simply be a matter of *katalēpsis* but of how that insight becomes performed. In a similar way, Hebrews claims that the spiritual perfection of Christ and the believer must be externalized through hopeful suffering in order to be confirmed and truly perfected.

Scholars have noted that, while Hebrews insists upon ethical improvement, it is rather vague about the content of those ethics.<sup>25</sup> The spare examples of meeting together, supporting those facing imprisonment, and obeying leaders (among few others) hardly constitute a program for virtue. Similarly, Stoic writers, particularly in the school's classical period, seldom relied on explicating discreet ethical actions or even virtues, instead theorizing about a perfected virtuous faculty. Perfection was personified in the character of the sage, who would come to understand his own wisdom by observing how he consistently performed *καθήκοντα*, which we could almost understand as "whatever" moral duties.

In distinction to notions of the Stoic wise man, however, the itinerary for moral progress in Hebrews does not merely (or even primarily) focus on the consistent performance of moral action indicating an enlightened moral faculty, though the text relies on such language. The early parenetic section 5:11-6:20 introduces not an argument concerning virtuous action but a Christological exposition of Jesus's death as priestly sacrifice and the vicarious perfection of the believer's moral faculty. For Hebrews, the audience could benefit not merely from ethical practice but from further insight about the nature of their participation in Christ and his vocation. (To this extent, we may be able to speak of the believer's "unwittingness," not to mention the continuous sense in which believers are still "being sanctified" [τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους; cf. 10:14]). Here we see a case in which indicative statements about the effects of Jesus's death play the role of parenetic exhortation to virtue in a way Stoics

25 On this, see now Knut Backhaus, "How to Entertain Angels: Ethics in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods, New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 149-176.

would see as beneath anyone who has truly attained perfection, even at the stage of having initially reached virtue's "peak."<sup>26</sup> "You ought to be teachers by now," exclaims the author (5:12); but not only are the readers still in need of instruction, they are expected to continue to obey the teachers and authorities within their midst (13:7 and 17).

Thus, Hebrews clearly suggests a rather different picture of the autonomy of the perfected believer than the Stoics did for the sage. This is not simply because believers are expected to obey teachers and leaders, however; the entire vision of moral progress found in Hebrews is geared toward fitting believers for a role within a community, a role defined by Christ's priestly vocation. The image of Christ the Priest fills a paradigmatic function for the believer's soul and helps incorporate the believer into his own communal role, understood as priestly vocation or, at the very least, as worshipful access. On the one hand, such a subsuming of the perfected individual, not just to the image of another individual (Christ) but to a specific role in a community would strike earlier Stoics as misunderstanding the nature of the perfected soul and its freedom. And while the notion of a perfected (though socially stratified) and actualized community of perfectly moral individuals is perhaps ultimately what marks Hebrews (and, indeed, much of the first-century Jesus movement) as particularly unique, it may profit scholars to conceive of the movement as the limit case (discussed above) of a general trend in Hellenistic moral thought—and specifically the Roman Stoics—to deploy Stoic notions of virtue to discuss the interplay between dispositions of the individual soul (one's *persona*) with various social roles. For Hebrews, indicative language of the nature of the Christian soul functions as a rhetorical container for the believer to live into, a goal for a parenetic program in which to make progress, a community and sanctuary to enter, a means for obtaining accessible yet elusive perfection.<sup>27</sup>

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26 As Owen, "Stages of Ascent," notes throughout his piece, a Stoic viewpoint would see Hebrews as conflating progress and perfection.

27 Many thanks to the reviewer for many helpful comments and to Troels Engberg-Pedersen for a conversation about this topic years ago.